Under a Non-Existent Commemorative Plaque

The 84th Anniversary of the Introduction of the Ghetto Bench at the University of Warsaw – A Speech Delivered at the Ceremony Organized by the Student Antifascist Committee in the Courtyard of the University of Warsaw on October 5, 2021

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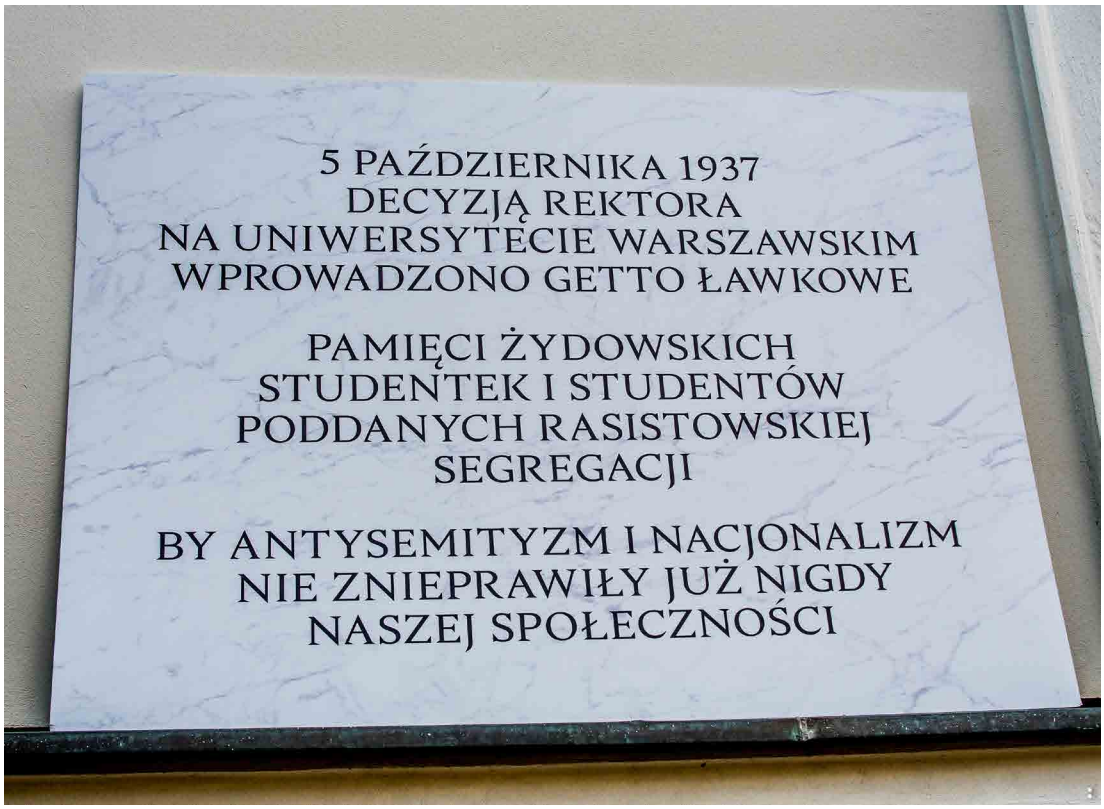
Abstract: The ghetto bench (1937) is emblematic of the process by which antisemitism was legalized and institutionalized in the interwar Republic of Poland (1918–1939). This text focuses on the failure to include this knowledge in the mainstream narrative, a problem which continues to this day. The lack of an integrated history results from a lack of condemnation, and from the fact that the dominant majority has not broken away from the framework of assumptions of concealed processes and events. After 1989, these assumptions have been additionally celebrated in the cult of interwar Polish statehood. The collision of the Polish dominant culture with the liberal-democratic formal-legal framework produced the collapse of liberal democracy in Poland (2015). This text thus questions the location of the ghetto bench and its cultural representations in the field of memory studies. By pointing to the current stakes of the discourse on Polish antisemitism, the author calls for a revision of socio-cultural norms which means socio-cultural change.

Keywords: antisemitism; ghetto bench; University of Warsaw; integrated history

Quite apart from commemorating the victims of the ghetto bench, we have begun here to commemorate subsequent anniversaries marking the non-existence of a plaque devoted to those victims. This absence was first problematized four years ago, more than eighty years after events, which may protect us from moral comfort – us who are gathered here and those for whom this plaque was absent, is absent, and will be absent.

The constellation that produced the ghetto bench is not only not a thing of the past, but it is also doing well today. At first inhibited only by its own resistance, this constellation has flourished with no obstacles since the beginning of independent Polish statehood which chose the interwar Republic of Poland as its signpost. The establishment of November 11 – the pogrom date *par excellence*[1] – as a national holiday was a clear sign of who can and who cannot feel at home in the new Poland post-1989.

1 "It was precisely this anti-Jewish violence which became the first spontaneous gesture of the nation upon gaining independence after the First World War. Literally on this day, when independence was declared, on 11 November 1918, a pogrom was organized in Kielce, which resulted in four murders and the wounding of a hundred others" (Tokarska-Bakir, 2021, p. 458). For more on the pogroms during the years 1918–1919, see also Cała, 2012, pp. 311–323; Gauden, 2018; Szwarcman-Czarnota, 2011; Szymaniak, 2014.



A cardboard model of the plaque commemorating the Jewish victims of the ghetto bench. The inscription proposed by the Student Antifascist Committee reads: "On October 5, 1937 pursuant to the decision of the rector a ghetto bench was established at the University of Warsaw. To the memory of Jewish students – female and male – subjected to racist segregation. May antisemitism and nationalism never pervert our community again". Stored in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, IFiS PAN), the cardboard model is publicly displayed once a year. This photograph was taken by Renata Zawadzka-Ben Dor in the yard of the University of Warsaw on October 5, 2021 (courtesy of Renata Zawadzka-Ben Dor)

The wording of the inscription on the plaque has not been endorsed by the University of Warsaw authorities. After having accepted the idea of the commemoration of the ghetto bench victims, the rector-affiliated University Senate Commission on Spatial Development established a team charged with working out the formula of the inscription. At present, the Student Antifascist Committee has no representative on the team.

The ghetto bench was a product of antisemitism as a collective identity passion. Antisemitism, which is the glue that binds a community defined in ethno-religious terms, and therefore one that – to this day, moreover – has not undergone secularization and civic redefinition. On a practical level, it was a product of the All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska; see Natkowska, 1999), the National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR; see Lipski, 1994, 2015; Rudnicki, 1985, 2018), as well as – perhaps even primarily – the state and its elites constituting the law. The backdrop for this process was the Catholic Church and masses of participating observers, providing leaders of hate with a sense of moral and socio-cultural legitimacy.

And now, one by one. The All-Polish Youth – a terrorist organization that called for *numerus clausus* at least since 1922 – has been a legal organization in Poland since

1989. The judiciary did not mind that in 1922, it was the All-Polish Youth that led a pogrom against Jews and violence against parliamentarians, which – taken together – ultimately led to the murder of Gabriel Narutowicz as the "Jewish president", to whom *Endek* [National Democratic] deputies from the Związek Ludowo-Narodowy (Popular National Union), boycotting the swearing-in ceremony, shouted from the gallery of the Column Hall: "The Jewish king!" (Brykczyński, 2017, p. 75).

Since 1995, the patron of the All-Polish Youth – a champion of chauvinism Polish-style (see Krzywiec, 2009) – Roman Dmowski has a roundabout named after him in the heart of Warsaw, which is the heart of Poland. Since 2006, he has also had a monument in the – highly symbolic – vicinity of the Ministry of National Education.[2] In independent Poland, it was possible to appoint the man who resurrected the All-Polish Youth, Roman Giertych, head of this ministry. The ministry, which – as can be seen from school textbooks and the fruits of school teaching after 1989 – was actually as much the ministry of National Education as National Democracy – both before the advent of Giertych and after his departure (see Szuchta, 2015).[3] The difference was one of openness and degree.

Giertych, however, played an epoch-making role in this process, consigning to the dustbin of history the mental-emotional and identity change that was to occur with Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and to result from Poland's commitments in the field of education. None of Giertych's successors returned public education in Poland to an anti-discriminatory course focused on emancipation: self-empowerment, intellectual autonomy, emotional imagination, responsibility for the consequences of one's own choices.

The openly fascist ONR became a legal organization in Poland in 2012 (see Pacholski, 2018, pp. 59–61). The ONR did not legalize itself by itself. Its legalization was effected by the independent judiciary. Similarly, the independent judiciary – starting in 1991 – effected the cassation and obliteration of postwar sentences against murderers of Jews (see Tokarska-Bakir, 2021, pp. 220–248, 271–286, 332–335; Wróblewski, 2013, p. 3).[4] Without this, monuments to these murderers would not have been built in the

2 Since November 2020 Roman Dmowski has been the patron of the Warszawa Wschodnia train station (Krawczyk, 2020). However, I am referring primarily to the policy of identity – including symbols – before the collapse of liberal democracy in 2015.

3 See a report on textbooks from 2004–2015 – that is, the first decade of Poland's membership in the European Union – containing, among others, texts by Alina Cała, Bożena Keff, Wojciech Lasota, Anna Lipowska-Teutsch, Anna Zawadzka: *Antysemityzm nie jest poglądem*, ed. Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz, with substantive consultation from Helena Datner, Stowarzyszenie Żydowskie Czulent, Kraków 2016 (Makówka-Kwapisiewicz, 2016). See also a report for the years 2000–2004 summarizing the *Szkoła Otwartości* program implemented by the Otwarta Rzeczpospolita – an association fighting against antisemitism and xenophobia: Katarzyna Chmielewska, Maciej Górny, Magdalena Kowalska, Tomasz Żukowski, *Wyniki monitoringu podręczników gimnazjalnych do języka polskiego, historii i wiedzy o społeczeństwie (wychowanie obywatelskie i wychowanie do życia w rodzinie) z perspektywy zawartego w nich obrazu mniejszości etnicznych, religijnych i innych* (Chmielewska et al., 2004).

4 For example, a multiple murderer of Jews – twelve times at least – "in 2000, on the basis of the Act of February 23, 1991 on declaring invalid judgments issued against people repressed for activities for the sake of an independent existence of the Polish State, obtained considerable compensation. There were many judgments

hearts of cities and towns – throughout the length and breadth of Poland. The flood of these commemorations is not something natural. This is not mushrooms after rain. Such things do not come out of nowhere, suddenly, and do not persist in a social vacuum. They would not be possible at all if it were not for their grounding in the dominant culture, in its elites, in its center far from the extremes, usually excluded from all suspicion. And specifically?

In 2011, I wrote about the introduction of the ghetto bench at the Warsaw Polytechnic Institute by Rector Józef Zawadzki (Janicka, 2011, pp. 229–231). In 2021 I read. The title *Szkoła bohaterów* (The School of Heroes). Subtitle. *Idealiści Niepodległej* (Idealists of Independence). The *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist gushes over the patriotic – *ergo* unblemished – ethos of the families of the heroes of the book *Kamienie na szaniec* (Stones for the Rampart), obligatory reading in schools: "The father of 'Zośka' – prof. Józef Zawadzki – is the president of the Polish Chemical Society, and from 1935 until the war, rector of the Polytechnic Institute" (Urzykowski, 2021, p. 5). Period. None of the editors paid any attention to this sentence. If anything is to change, such sentences, such subtitles, such titles and such articles must cease to be possible.

I read further. Equating totalitarianisms rules. It is about the Stefan Batory Lyceum in Warsaw. Subtitle. *Chuligani narodowi i trockiści* (National hooligans and Trotskyists). The former

> fascinated with nationalism, initiate excesses, persecute students of Jewish origin. 'The national camp, the so-called *Endek* hooligans from our year are: Kindler, Guttakowski, Krupkowski, Bytnar, Rejnowicz, Gruszka, I think Barcz, Szlenkier, and, well, me. We sympathized and then belonged to the ONR-ABC youth groups' – Kazimierz Sułowski reveals to Wiesław Budzyński.[5] […] The inclusion of Jan Bytnar among the '*Endek* hooligans' will be the subject of a dispute for many years to come. Membership of 'Rudy' in ONR School Groups will be strongly denied by, inter alia, his friend Danuta Rossman, a liaison officer of the Szare Szeregi (Gray Ranks). (Urzykowski, 2021, p. 6)

And even if. Baczyński was in Spartacus at the same time. He was reading Trotsky. The matter is settled. This is what the newspaper of the Polish intelligentsia, which is the liberal-democratic mainstream, has to say on the matter.

And we are waiting for the anniversary celebration of so-called Kristallnacht as the International Day of Combating Fascism and Antisemitism, during which, once again, probably not a word will be said about the Polish context of the Nazi action, specifically the act adopted by the Polish parliament and signed by the Polish president on the withdrawal of citizenship from Jews and communists – to the extent there's a difference – living outside Poland, who "lost contact with Polish statehood" or "acted abroad

in Polish courts after 1991 in which someone who cheated, robbed and killed Polish Jewish citizens could be considered a fighter for the country's independence" (Tokarska-Bakir, 2021, p. 334).

5 At issue here is Wiesław Budzyński's *Miłość i śmierć Krzysztofa Kamila* (Budzyński, 1999, p. 40).

to the detriment of the Polish State".[6] Anticipating the Republic of Poland, the German Reich robbed and deported to the Polish border thousands who were not allowed into Polish territory despite still having Polish citizenship. Late fall 1938. A humanitarian catastrophe in the open. A relative of one of the families, Herszel Grynszpan, kills a Nazi diplomat in Paris. On November 9, in retaliation, the Third Reich organizes Kristallnacht, which we do remember, not wanting to remember that at that time, in Zbąszyń, the Republic of Poland was harassing Jews who had already been – for over five years – victims of Nazism.

It is not impossible that instead of that, two days later – on November 11 – we read: "In November 1918, there was enthusiasm in Poland. And this enthusiasm later resulted in the Miracle on the Vistula of 1920, when all the nation's social strata took up arms" (Maciorowski & Romanowski, 2021, p. 8). And yet we know the fate of Polish Jewish citizens in 1920 – including those who wanted to take up arms by volunteering for the Polish army. The internment camp in Jabłonna was also a prefiguration of the ghetto, if not just the ghetto.

What has been happening in Poland since 1989 is a clash of civilizations. The collision of the liberal-democratic formal-legal framework with the dominant culture. The fall of liberal democracy in Poland in 2015 – preceded by a quarter-century that can be described as a *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* – is a victory for this culture. One must start fighting it, beginning with yourself and your own reference group.

We need a plaque. We demand a plaque. But the memory of the victims of the ghetto bench and all other victims of Polish antisemitism will not be safe. The memory of the victims will not even be a memory until what was – instead of being what is – is a thing of the past.

Translator wishes to remain anonymous

6 The Act of March 31, 1938 on the deprivation of citizenship, Dziennik ustaw nr 22, poz. 191, p. 340 ("Ustawa z dnia 31 marca 1938 r. o pozbawianiu obywatelstwa", 1938, p. 340). Below the text in the Dziennik Ustaw, are the signatures of the President of the Republic of Poland, Ignacy Mościcki, and the President of the Council of Ministers and the Minister of Interior, Felicjan Sławoj-Składkowski. Only the accompanying secret consular instruction stated that the act was aimed at Jews and communists.

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Pod nieistniejącą tablicą pamiątkową:
84. rocznica wprowadzenia getta ławkowego na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim –
przemówienie podczas uroczystości zorganizowanej przez Studencki Komitet Antyfaszystowski
na dziedzińcu UW 5 października 2021 roku

Abstrakt: Getto ławkowe (1937) to emblemat procesu legalizacji i instytucjonalizacji antysemityzmu w międzywojennej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (1918–1939). Tekst stawia w centrum uwagi trwającą do dzisiaj niemożność wprowadzenia wiedzy na ten temat do narracji głównego nurtu. Brak historii zintegrowanej wynika z braku potępienia i odcięcia się przez dominującą większość od ramowych założeń przemilczanych procesów i wydarzeń. Po 1989 roku założenia te są dodatkowo celebrowane w kulcie międzywojennej polskiej państwowości. Zderzenie polskiej kultury dominującej z liberalno-demokratyczną ramą formalno-prawną wyprodukowało upadek liberalnej demokracji (2015). Tekst kwestionuje tym samym lokowanie getta ławkowego i jego kulturowych reprezentacji w polu badań nad pamięcią. Wskazując na aktualne stawki dyskursu o polskim antysemityzmie, autorka postuluje rewizję społeczno-kulturowych norm i społeczno-kulturową zmianę.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: antysemityzm; getto ławkowe; Uniwersytet Warszawski; historia zintegrowana

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